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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001122

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DEPT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: BNP CHAIRPERSON PROMOTES SON, LOYALISTS, AND
HARDLINERS FOLLOWING PARTY COUNCIL MEETING

REF: DHAKA 1029

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Nicholas Dean. Reasons: 1.4 (b)
and (d)

Summary

1. (C) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) held its National Council on December 8 as required under the political parties registration act. Newly re-elected Chairwoman Khaleda Zia recycled party themes and allegations against the ruling Awami League in her opening speech. Zia used the National Council to consolidate her family's grip over the party, elevating her son Tarique Rahman to the new post of Senior Vice Chairman. Zia expanded the Executive Standing Committee to 19 persons, rewarding loyalists and party hardliners while snubbing erstwhile reformists. Tarique's "appearance" at the Council and selection as Khaleda's deputy/heir apparent represents a setback for reform efforts within the BNP. Some suspect the BNP may attempt to mobilize street demonstrations as early as January, but it is unclear if the fractured and disorganized party has the ability to do so.

Khaleda Zia Speech Rehashes Same Old Message

2. (SBU) Surprising no one, in the run-up to the Party Council meeting, Khaleda Zia was re-elected unopposed as the BNP Chairperson. Her opening speech at the party's National Council was a collection of well-worn themes and implied allegations against the Awami League and focused on four main themes. First, she painted a conspiracy by the Awami League and Caretaker government to keep the BNP out of power by rigging the 2008 election, which she called "preplanned and stage-managed." Her second theme focused on the sacrifices her family had made while "serving" Bangladesh: including the assassination of her husband, her "false" arrest under the CTG, the torture of her sons and the "politically motivated" charges of corruption against them. She also blamed non-BNP governments for neglecting Bangladesh's economic advancement, and trumpeted her governments' efforts to reduce poverty in Bangladesh. Finally, she described a BNP-led Bangladesh as independent from "outside influences," an apparent reference to the perceived closeness between the Awami League and India. Her speech set the tone for the party's National Council, which lionized Zia and her son Tarique Rahman and avoided sensitive debates on how the politically fragmented BNP should move forward.

Tarique Rahman Appointed Party Vice Chairman

13. (C) The BNP Councilors voted to appoint Zia's son, Tarique Rahman to the newly created post of Vice Chairman. By virtue of this appointment, Rahman will join the BNP Standing Committee and be responsible for leading the party in his mother's absence. Tarique made a cameo appearance at the Council via a video taped message from London. Local media reports commented that Rahman "stole the show" at the Council meeting. Dhaka Mayoral candidate and BNP partisan Abdul Awal Mintoo told Polcouns that Rahman remains bitter about his situation and claimed Rahman was not eager to return to Bangladesh. Other BNP insiders noted that Rahman's wife was unhappy with his appointment and had been trying to convince him to leave politics since the family left Bangladesh. (Comment: While the decision to elevate Tarique Rahman to such a high position may not be surprising, it represents a serious blow to reform efforts in the BNP and could presage a more confrontational approach by the Opposition. End comment.)

Reformists Marginalized and Loyalists Promoted

14. (C) Zia expanded the BNP's Executive Standing Committee to 19 seats and announced her selections in the immediate aftermath of the Council. Members of the BNP's reformist faction, which sought to replace Zia during the CTG were notably absent from the list of those selected while several Zia loyalist and BNP hardliners were elevated to the party's highest decision making body. The fate of Secretary General Khondker Delwar Hossain remains uncertain. Some BNP sources

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suggested that Delwar had reluctantly agreed to step down after six months to provide an honorable exit. Media reports stated he would stay as Secretary General until his replacement was selected, which BNP insiders have told us has upset Delwar.

Comment

15. (C) The BNP National Council offered no surprises. While preparations did generate some enthusiasm among the rank and file, the BNP remains fragmented and disorganized. Party factions continue to confront opposing members, sometimes violently, in particular in major urban areas. The ongoing debate regarding selecting a new Secretary General is illustrative of the BNP's disunity. BNP insiders expect hardliners to try to mobilize the public against the Awami League government as early as January or February. However, it remains to be seen if the BNP is able to bring sizable numbers to the streets. At the same time, Khaleda will face pressure from moderates in the party to return to Parliament in the coming months. The battle for the BNP's future will continue.

Dean